Over the last decade, “porno chic,” the “pornification” of society, and the “sexualization of culture” have become major topics of concern in news media, in policy arenas, and in academic study. The notions of “pornification” and “sexualization” capture the growing sense of Western societies as saturated by sexual representations and discourses, and in which pornography has become increasingly influential, permeating mainstream media and contemporary culture. Porn stars have emerged as best-selling authors and celebrities; a “porno chic” aesthetic can be seen in fashion, music videos, and advertising; and practices once associated with the sex industry—for example lap dancing and pole dancing—have become newly respectable, promoted as a regular feature of corporate entertainment or recreational activity. This shift speaks to something more than the idea that “sex has become the big story” (Plummer 1995: 4). As Feona Attwood has noted, it denotes a range of things:

- a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities;
- the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; [and the] fondness for the scandals, controversies and panics around sex.

(Attwood 2006: 77)

This chapter gives an overview of some of the key feminist perspectives on sexualization, to highlight areas of debate and indicate directions for future research. It is worth noting that debates about the sexualization of culture constitute a complicated and contested terrain, one suffused with strong feelings, and frequently polarized. Too often the field seems distorted by the long shadows of earlier debates. Regarding the “sex wars” or “porn wars” of the early 1980s, Drucilla Cornell (2000) has argued that every feminist was made to take a position or was forcibly allocated one. Unlike academic domains that do not attract such passion, academic writing about sexualization is characterized by heightened emotion and a distinctively “performative” quality in which scholars rhetorically conjure “harm,” claim authority, express “concern,” present themselves in a favorable light, defend against particular readings of their argument, etc. My own—no less rhetorical but perennially uncomfortable—position here, as someone who is neither anti-sex nor anti-porn, is...
not sanguine or celebratory about the modes of sexism (and racism, classism, and heteronormativity) at work in contemporary “sexualized” culture. Sex positive but anti-sexism, I remain suspicious about the rhetorical/performative work—and the epistemic violence—done by such labels; I have consistently advocated complicating polarized positions in the emerging “sexualization wars.”

The sexualization of culture?

Anxieties and concerns about sexualization have come to the fore in recent years across several spheres. They can be seen in influential reports from think tanks (e.g. Rush and La Nauze 2006; APA 2007; Fawcett Society 2009), government reports (e.g. Byron 2008; Buckingham et al. 2010; Papadopoulos 2010; Bailey 2011); activist campaigns (for example to change the licensing laws for lap dancing clubs), as well as a variety of well-publicized popular books (e.g. Levy 2005; Durham 2009; Levin and Kilbourne 2009). The titles of reports, books, and feature articles signal some of the contours of the anxieties—particularly those concerning children—e.g. “so sexy, so soon” or “too much, too young.” Concerns have centered on the direct sexualization of children in, for example, the resurgence of the child beauty pageant, as well as on the persistent interpellation of children in sexual terms, often evidenced by the marketing to younger and younger girls of “sexualized” clothing, such as padded bras and G-string knickers. More broadly, anxieties are expressed about the increasing volume and intensity of “sexualized” material in the media, which leads, it is argued, to a raft of harms for girls and women, including poor attainment at school, depression, low self-esteem, and eating disorders (APA 2007).

Media coverage of these discussions of “sexualization” has been extensive, but the media occupy a contradictory position. They are best thought of in multiple terms as a key site of sexualization, of concerns about sexualization, and, furthermore, of concerns about concerns about sexualization. At least in the UK, newspapers are replete with “sexualized” representations (pictures of semi-naked women, “sexy” stories, adverts for telephone sex lines, etc.); they have also been a central location for critical discussions of “sexualization”—with certain newspapers taking the role of “moral guardians,” with repeated articles about the dangers of sexualized culture. These are frequently accompanied by multiple pictures of the offending content—as seen in the Daily Mail’s outraged coverage of the TV talent show The X Factor: the newspaper reproduced several stills from the program’s allegedly shocking and inappropriate dance routines—including some which had apparently not even been aired. Newspapers also produce a different kind of article, which I call the “sexualization fatigue think piece.” Here journalists adopt a superior, world-weary tone of boredom about the banality of the sexualization debates, and/or worry about the harm of moral panics; they suggest that the elevated public concern about sexualization either distracts from more important issues (e.g. poverty) or lends legitimacy to increased surveillance of the individual or regulation of the media. We should be wary, then, of examining the media only as a site of sexualization—and be aware of its complicated, multiple positionings.
Feminist perspectives on “sexualization”

Different and diverse feminist positions engage with the sexualization of culture. Some contemporary radical feminist arguments are reminiscent of the second-wave anti-pornography perspectives of Andrea Dworkin (1981) and Catherine MacKinnon (e.g. Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988). Sheila Jeffreys’s (2009) *The Industrial Vagina* is an impassioned polemic against the “global sex trade” that connects the main-streaming of pornography to military prostitution, sex tourism, and the trafficking of women and children. Gail Dines (2010) connects the “gonzo” porn that dominates the internet to the wider hypersexualized culture (see also Tankard Reist 2009).

Other—contrastingly—third-wave positions build from the sex-positive feminism of the same period (Califa 1994; Juffer 1998; Johnson 2002; Jenkins and Church Gibson 2003) to offer more optimistic views of sexualization grounded in understandings of women not as victims but instead as producers and consumers of “sexual” material—in ways that break significantly with constructions of women as passive and asexual (Lumby 1997; Smith 2007; Attwood 2009). “A whole series of signifiers are linked to promote a new, liberated, contemporary sexuality for women; sex is stylish, a source of physical pleasure, a means of creating identity, a form of body work, self-expression, a quest for individual fulfilment” (Attwood 2006: 86).

A further distinctive feminist perspective explores contemporary sexualization as a postfeminist and neoliberal phenomenon linked to consumerism and discourses of celebrity, choice, and empowerment (Coleman 2008; Gill 2008; Munford 2009; Whitehead and Kurz 2009; Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas 2011). Some see in contemporary sexualized culture not a more feminist sexual future but a turning backwards (Whelahan 2000), a “retro sexism” (Williamson 2003) in which objectifying representations of women are wrapped up in a feisty discourse of fake empowerment (Levy 2005).

None of this latter work sits comfortably in the old “anti-porn” versus “sex positive” binary. Much of it is explicitly pro-sex, but its target of critique is the way in which sexualization, power, and commerce intersect—often at the expense of the possibilities of exploring, experimenting, and celebrating diverse sexualities.

Looking at media portrayals of women, my own work (Gill 2008, 2009a; Harvey and Gill 2011a, 2011b) has charted a shift from “objectification” to “sexual sub-jectification.” Women are no longer depicted as passive sex objects, but hailed as confident, freely choosing, seemingly empowered sexual subjects. I examine the exclusions of this change—only some women (young, slim, attractive) are accorded sexual subjecthood—and the shift in subjectivity it invites/requires. Developing the Foucaultian notion of “technologies of selfhood,” I see the contemporary sexualized, consumerist, and neoliberal societies as calling forth a new postfeminist feminine subject who is incited to be compulsorily sexy and always “up for it.” Given a corresponding shift in the sexual representation of men’s bodies in the media, I have also examined how young men respond to the increasingly idealized and eroticized representation of the male body (Gill et al. 2000; Gill 2011; see also Evans et al. 2010).

These divergent feminist approaches have generated a wide range of debates and points of contestation. Three important areas of tension relate to media influence and audience agency, power and difference, and what can be “done” about sexualization, with media literacy offered as a kind of panacea.
Media influence: beyond victims and agents

Many of the debates about sexualization hinge, in different ways, on an understanding of the effects of a putatively “sexualized” culture, and individuals’ capacities to resist, refuse, or resignify its meanings—notions often treated in shorthand as instances of “agency” or “empowerment.” Underlying these debates are profoundly different understandings of the media and its influence. On one side is the dominant, US tradition, with its roots in psychology, which sees (sexualized) media as negatively affecting individuals’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Media emerge here as homogeneous, monolithic, and all powerful: The Media, rather than a diversity of different media, platforms, genres, and productions, with—presumably—different kinds of representations of girls and young women, and, moreover, in which girls are increasingly involved as active producers, not merely consumers. Such a view can be seen in the APA’s Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (APA 2007); its report on time spent “with the media” made no distinctions between different kinds of media and how they are used, e.g. watching a documentary versus reading a magazine versus playing an online game versus updating a Facebook profile.

At its heart is the notion of media audiences as passive dupes who unquestioningly and uncritically absorb media messages “hypodermically” injected into them. Influence is characterized almost exclusively in terms of “mimicry” and “imitation.” For example, Sharon Lamb and Zoë Peterson (2012) ask, “Why do girls imitate sexualized media and how conscious is this imitation?” They speculate on the meanings and pleasures of imitation but do not question the idea that this is the fundamental psychological process at issue in girls’ engagement with the media. Moreover, when discussed in relation to the media, young women emerge as isolated, atomized, passive individuals, rather than engaged social actors embedded in family, friendship, school, and many other networks. Individuals often are treated as tabulae rasae (who, without the media, presumably would freely go on to develop a “healthy” sexuality). A particularly problematic idea of childhood innocence is frequently mobilized in debates about children and sexualization (e.g. Buckingham 2000; Egan and Hawkes 2008)

A contrasting tradition of research is found in some audience media and cultural studies scholarship (e.g. Radway 1984; Ang 1985; Hermes 1995; Gauntlett and Hill 1999). This research often starts agnostic about the putative intensification of sexualization; it sees the media more positively as offering “tools to think with” (Bragg and Buckingham 2009) rather than as agents of harm. Framed partly as a response to the psychological tradition, this work critiques media effects and presents audiences as active, knowledgeable, sophisticated, and critical users or consumers of media (Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Smith 2007; Jackson and Vares 2011).

David Buckingham and Sara Bragg champion the view that children are not naïve or incompetent consumers but use a range of critical skills and perspectives when interpreting sexual content. Moreover, children’s responses to sexual imagery display “a well-developed understanding of how such images are constructed and manipulated,” and children and young people are “literate” and “highly critical” consumers (Buckingham and Bragg 2004: 238). This sees children as actively deciding how far to engage with sexualized culture.
Such research is important in exploring the diverse meanings people give to engagements with media and in according proper respect to audiences, particularly children and young people. At times, however, this research can offer overly optimistic readings—seeing autonomy and choice and resistance everywhere. Bragg and Buckingham present young people as “autonomous, calculating and self-regulating entities in control of their own quest for knowledge in relation to sex and sexual material” (2009: 136) and able to make their own decisions, judgments, and choices. These apparently extend even to the “choice” of whether to be a child: “the media are creating new ways of being a child—not corrupting but confronting young people with choices about whether to remain a child or whether and when to enter the ‘adult’ world of sexual media” (2009: 136). Here, then, “child” becomes simply another discursive identity category, which subjects can choose or choose not to inhabit—as if that choice were fully within their control.

Perhaps reacting against the negative focus on “harm,” this research emphasizes both the “pleasures” of sexualized culture and how problematic meanings may be resisted. For example, Holland and Attwood argue that women participating in pole dancing classes “resisted” the idea of objectification and “reworked” traditional indicators of femininity “into experiences of sexual agency and power” (2009: 177).

The difference between this and more “critical” readings may come down to an attitude or affective disposition, a tendency to read optimistically or pessimistically. But it also raises theoretical and methodological concerns, notably the tendency to take at face value interviewees’ statements rather than seeing them as themselves performative. Moreover, with important exceptions (e.g. Ang 1985; Walkerdine 1997a, 1997b), the tradition relies on the assumption that respondents are “transparent to themselves”—i.e. able to excavate and lay bare their feelings and influences, as if they were entirely rational unitary subjects. Such a perspective is no more able than is the “effects” tradition to understand the complicated terrain of desire, intimacy, and sexuality. We need new psychosocial perspectives that move beyond the idea of both dupes/victims and autonomous agents, and more sophisticated formulations of the complex relationship between media and individuals, between culture and subjectivity.

**Power and difference: thinking intersectionally about sexualization**

Although notions of agency and empowerment animate debates about “sexualization,” the literature rarely considers power. Curiously, empowerment is treated as an individualized phenomenon which, although clearly connected to gender and age, is not related analytically to issues of power, inequality, or oppression. Why is sexualization so infrequently connected to sexism or to racism, to class inequality or homophobia? These questions relate to my concerns about the utility of the notion of “sexualization.” While they appear to speak to something apparently new and real, the notions of “sexualization” or “pornification” or “raunch” (McNair 2002; Levy 2005) are rife with problems. The terms are too general. They are difficult to operationalize and therefore to use analytically. They tend to homogenize, ignoring differences and obscuring the fact that different people are “sexualized” in different ways and with different meanings. Sexualization does not operate outside of processes of gendering, racialization, and classing, and works within a visual economy that remains profoundly ageist,
(dis)ablist, and heteronormative (Gill 2009b). Furthermore, the terms seem to pull us back into a moral domain, rather than one of politics or ethics—they pull towards judgments about “explicitness” and “exposure” rather than questions about equality or justice. Might it not be more productive to talk about sexism rather than sexualization? For all their force in animating and inspiring a new generation of feminists (Banyard 2010), I worry too that these terms reinstate the terms of the “sex wars” of the 1980s, with their familiar polarizations and discomfitting alliances between pro-censorship feminists and right-wing religious organizations (Cornell 2000).

This is worsened by the profoundly classed, racialized, and heteronormative framing of the debates themselves, whose privileged object of anxiety and “concern” has been the white, Western, middle-class, girl-child, sometimes figured as a “typical 13-year-old girl”—able-bodied, Anglo-American, presumed heterosexual (APA 2007; Lamb and Peterson 2012). This figure is repeatedly mobilized in academic, policy, and media reports and comes to constitute or define who is “at risk” (Harris 2004: 13). She becomes discursively overdetermined to such an extent that her specificity is rendered invisible: She is always already (pre)figured, she shapes what becomes thinkable about “sexualization.” What if we changed her gender or ethnicity, or thought of her as a lesbian or as living with a disability? This would open new ways of thinking—sexual experiences might not be framed so strongly in terms of risk and danger.

More broadly, we urgently need an intersectional approach to the complex nexus of sex, media, and power. Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix explain that intersectionality signifies:

The complex, irreducible, varied and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation—economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands.

(Brah and Phoenix 2004: 76)

This, then, is a call to think about “sexualization” and sexual empowerment with sexism, racism, ageism, classism, homophobia, (dis)ablism, and also to think transnationally (Imre et al. 2009). Besides integrating sexism with other axes of power and difference, it is also a matter of facing up to the complex dynamics and complicities in play in the current moment—precisely those complicities that repeatedly locate white, middle-class, heterosexual North American girls as the privileged subjects of the debate.

**Responding to “sexualization”: beyond “media literacy”**

How should we respond to “sexualization”? What should we say about the growing status of “media literacy” as an apparent panacea? The notion of media literacy as a Good Thing is fast taking on the status of common sense. There is a European Charter for media literacy. UNESCO pledges that “empowerment of young people through information and media literacy is an important prerequisite for fostering equitable access to information and knowledge, and building inclusive knowledge societies” (UNESCO 2006, quoted in Lunt and Livingstone 2012). Who could object
to young people (indeed all people) getting the tools to deconstruct and critique media messages so they have a healthy skepticism? What’s not to like?

One problem with media literacy is the implicit understanding of subjectivity on which it rests. The project of critique, dissection, comparison, and deconstruction relies on a model of the subject as unified and rational; it operates largely as a cognitive process. The idea seems to be that if someone is media literate—if they can discourse critically on an image’s or text’s aims and techniques—they will somehow be inoculated or protected against its otherwise harmful effects. It relies upon the idea of subjectivity as coherent, rather than split or contradictory, with the assumption that affect follows knowledge in rather a neat and obedient manner. I question this contention.

My research with Sue Jackson and Tiina Vares (e.g. Jackson et al. 2013; Vares et al. 2011) challenges the easy celebration of media literacy. The “tween” girls we studied show varying degrees of media literacy, with some of them extremely critical consumers of media, even from the age of ten. They are familiar with the language of critique and take pleasure in “unpacking” media images to reveal their artifice. In particular the girls enjoyed displaying their awareness that media images are constructed, with many exchanges about techniques such as airbrushing, the use of Photoshop, or the difference between magazines’ “before and after” shots, in which “everything had changed,” not just the area of the body that “should” have done.

Some girls discussed their anger about “anorexic models,” girls in magazines with “perfect skin,” and, more broadly, the gap between media images of girls and young women and those in the real world. They were contemptuous of the idea that celebrity endorsements would persuade them to buy any particular product. Indeed, in many senses the girls seemed archetypal media literate subjects—knowing, critical appraisers of adverts, magazines, and a whole variety of other genres. Yet despite this—despite an extraordinarily sophisticated vocabulary of critique—they said media representations still got to them, still had an ability to hurt them, still—as they repeatedly told us—made them “feel bad” or “feel sad” and/or made them long to look a particular way or to own a particular product. In other words, the girls’ ability to produce subtle and sometimes angry decodings of media content did not seem to displace alternative, powerful responses to what they saw, read, and heard. The girls did not seem to feel “better” or more “empowered” by dint of their knowledge of media practices. They might enjoy showing off this knowledge but it did not negate or change other, often painful, feelings. In some cases, having the knowledge made them feel even more trapped—by the sense that they understood how it all worked: They saw through the “fake-ness” (as they put it), yet still felt they had to live up to the particular images of beauty they were fed.

Another objection is found in a critique of the way that media literacy forces the work of deconstructing media back on to individuals. This is part of a wider shift in power and governance towards greater self-governmentality, in which individuals are constituted as self-governing subjects. In relation to media regulation it can be seen at a policy level (at least in the UK): with a move away from state regulation and an increasing focus on media literate individuals self-regulating in relation to media content (Arthurs 2004). Media literacy thus becomes an individual obligation; we are made responsible for our own engagements with media—both what we use and how we engage. To champion media literacy, then, is to endorse this shift in power, and
to make individuals responsible for the work of thinking critically and deconstructing media content. But it also, surely, espouses a kind of defeatism, for it suggests that media cannot be changed. All that can be changed is how we engage with them. Thus young people are asked to come equipped with tools to deconstruct sexism; young women are exhorted to become better at dissecting media’s “sexualized” images and critiquing harmful images.

Why have we (feminists) become so quietist? When did engaging with sexist media seem to call out for an ever more sophisticated and literate media user, rather than a campaign to stamp out sexism? Have we given up on changing the world, to focus only on tweaking our critical orientations to it? As well as being part of a wider shift in the operation of power, I take this issue to be deeply gendered, part of the “postfeminist problem” in which gender inequality is no longer taken very seriously in Northern/Western developed societies, is not felt to be a “real” problem or form of oppression (see Gill 2007). Quite rightly, we do not respond to racism in the media with calls to educate young black people to better deconstruct racist images. On the contrary, we work to eradicate racism; we speak of its institutional nature, as a structural feature endemic to many organizations, including media (Downing and Husband 2005; Rattansi 2007). Yet issues pertaining to gender, sexuality, and sexualization show little evidence of such a robust response. Instead, calls for media literacy education imply that an informed populace of “critical” young women is the best that can be hoped for. Perhaps ironically, this focus can itself seem sexist, not only because it treats gender oppression as trivial, but also because it emphasizes the requirement for girls and young women to work on the self, to perfect the ways they engage with media, to become ever more responsible neoliberal subjects. Might it not be time to get angry again, to try to change the world? Media literacy as a kind of catch-all solution to “sexualization” needs to be interrogated.

Conclusion

The term “sexualization” speaks to a variety of phenomena, perceived changes in culture, and significant shifts in representational practices over the last two decades, e.g. the increased visibility of eroticized depictions of the male body in public space and the “postfeminist” return to displaying a sexualized female body in the media. However, as an analytical category it has limited usefulness. It polarizes debate and accentuates division. It pushes moralistic rather than political responses to representational culture. It flattens and homogenizes significant differences in the way bodies are figured and materialized in the media. I am repeatedly struck by the “lifted out” quality of debates about sexualization—removed from the messy, complicated, power-suffused sites of everyday life (e.g. schools) and anchored only in a number of endlessly recirculated hyperreal (in Baudrillard’s terms) examples, such as child beauty pageants or the sale of items of “inappropriate” clothing. The tools and vocabularies supplied by “sexualization” do not now offer us leverage to think, act, and intervene. We must go beyond both the “effects” and the “critical readers” paradigms, to develop more nuanced, psychosocial engagements that push past the familiar figures of the cultural dope or the autonomous, freely choosing agent. We
need to think further about power and difference. And in moving from scholarship to activism or policy response, we need to question whether “media literacy” is the best way to respond to a media and a wider culture that remain characterized by stark inequality and injustice.

References


